

On May 4, 1961, a group of courageous men and women, black and white boarded two buses departing from Washington, D.C., and headed for the Deep South. This experiment, organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), intended to test states' adherence to the U.S. Supreme Court's 1960 *Boynton v. Virginia* ruling, which deemed segregation of interstate bus and rail stations unconstitutional.

As the buses moved through the Deep South, the riders were met with extreme violence and opposition. In various parts of Alabama, Freedom Rider buses were brutally attacked by mobs of angry whites and even burned—without any police intervention. As the violence escalated, most of the riders would have to be evacuated by officials from the U.S. Justice Department to New Orleans, Louisiana, but the remaining passengers regrouped and were reinforced by other inspired volunteers.

Despite these grave circumstances, these heroic men and women continued their mission until May 24, 1961, when all of the riders were arrested in Jackson, Mississippi. The Freedom Riders highlighted the continued violence and racism endured by blacks in the South to the nation and the world. After the completion of the first Freedom Ride, dozens more were motivated and held protests in train stations and airports. The negative publicity pushed President John F. Kennedy to take steps to end the violence and uphold the spirit of the *Boynton* ruling. Finally, in November of 1961, the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) issued orders that officially desegregated interstate buses, trains and terminals.

The 1961 Freedom Rides helped inspire decades of civil rights activism that ultimately secured a greater level of equal opportunity for African Americans and other minority groups. It demonstrated how powerful a movement of concerned Americans can be and has produced figures like my colleagues, Congressman John Lewis (D-GA) and Congressman Bob Filner (D-CA).

As we reflect on this monumental anniversary of the Freedom Rides, we must note that positive change is produced by active and committed citizens. While the fight for equal opportunity is not over, I know that with continued pressure and participation from the American people, our nation will draw closer to becoming the fair and just democracy it can be. It is with a grateful heart and hope for the future that I commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Freedom Rides. I look forward to continued civic engagement which follows the example of those courageous Americans.

